

I'll Never Let You Go (five words i'll never say) by AabH

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Bisexual Mike Wheeler, Closeted Character, Homophobic Language, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Mentions of HIV, Mike Wheeler Loves Will Byers, Nightmares, Pining, Protective Mike Wheeler, Slow Burn, mentions of abuse

Language: English

Characters: Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2020-08-16

Updated: 2021-06-11

Packaged: 2022-03-31 14:22:41

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 3

Words: 16,632

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

This fic takes place over the course of a few years. It focuses on Mike, his struggles with his feelings, and his sexuality.

Both were quiet for a long time and Mike began to wonder if Will had dozed off, fallen asleep in the warm summer sun. Mike didn't want to wake him so he just watched the trees sway overhead, trying to quiet his thoughts. He blinked when he felt Will roll over and brush against him as the smaller teen adjusted himself. He was warm, so much warmer than The Mindflyer had been in Mike's dream. Warm and safe and well, nothing lurking beneath the surface. The Flyer was dead and Will was fine.

Mike wanted to touch him, to gain further confirmation, but he didn't. Boys didn't do that, touch each other for comfort or affection unless it was a quick hug or a slap on the back, even if they cared about each other.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Just a quick look at a closeted kid and how he rationalizes his developing feelings. CW: for language and outdated ideas about HIV during the 80s.

UPDATE: Okay, yeah, this didn't end up being a one shot. Apparently we are going to end up with a multi chapter fic I write in between my other works. This story is going to span years and starts around age 14.

Mike woke in a cold sweat, mouth still parted in a silent scream, heart pounding out of his chest from fear. It took him a moment to orient himself in his dark and muggy room with the light cancelling curtains his father had installed over the window, but after a few moments of confusion, he managed the task. Once he was sure he was upstairs, in his room (not in the basement, not staring at those unfamiliar and cold eyes), Mike rolled over and looked at his clock radio. It was almost one in the afternoon. How had he slept so late? Ted has installed the curtains to save on energy bills but all they'd done was make it so Mike's internal clock was always on the fritz. He was wasting one of the last days of summer he had before the school year started and the fear faded to annoyance.

Mike touched his head, felt the sweat that had collected around his hair and drew his hand back, disgusted. What happened? Had he been dreaming? What had it been about? He couldn't remember but he knew it had been something bad, *really* bad; bad enough to make him scream in his sleep and leave him shaking from the adrenaline and anxiety. Mike chewed his lip, still nervous and on edge from whatever the dream had been about.

He rolled onto his belly and squirmed until he was halfway off the bed, dangling upside down with all the blood rushing to his head and causing him to flush as he searched for his radio. After a few minutes of digging through a mountain of things he should really get around to putting away, Mike found it and dragged it from beneath the bed and righted himself, pulling the radio up with him. He hesitated, not

sure why he'd felt the desire to retrieve it in the first place but knowing there had been a reason.

He wanted to call Will, to hear his voice. Had the dream, the nightmare, been about Will? Maybe. Mike just knew he had to talk to his friend, and he had to do it *now*.

Flat dead eyes, wide and watching, not recognizing him, the sound of his voice. That face, so familiar and now foreign, a stranger in his friend's skin.

Mike shook his head and pushed his hair back from his now dry face and turned the radio on. He spun the dial, searching for the channel that was theirs, his and Will's alone. He found it and pressed on the button.

"Will, you up?"

What a dumb question, it was almost one; of course Will was awake. His slim, nervous friend rarely slept in and never this late.

"Will, you there?"

Mike listened to the quiet static for a minute before trying again.

"Will?"

Nothing, just that quiet hum of the radio and his air conditioner. Maybe he should try another channel, the one the whole group used? What would be the point? Will and Mike always turned the radio to *their* channel at night so they could talk and not bother anyone else, but lately, they hadn't even done that. Would Will have changed the channel back, to the communal one? Mike didn't think so, The Party hadn't used it much at all this summer because of how busy they'd all been, doing their own thing.

Mike set the radio down, feeling uneasy.

Calm down. Just because he didn't answer doesn't mean anything is wrong.

It was the middle of summer, Will was probably doing yard work for

his mom or something. Mike could ride over and talk to him, face to face, maybe pull some weeds for Joyce or lay mulch while they talked and he'd feel better. Mike rolled off of his bed and pulled on his clothes, not bothering to fuss with combing the curls out of his hair and convince it to lay flat. Will didn't care what Mike's hair looked like anyway.

He trotted down the stairs past his mom who was braiding Holly's hair at the kitchen table. She looked up, hair tie between her teeth as Mike grabbed an apple and shoved it in his mouth while he pulled his shoes on.

"El called. She wants to know if you're coming by today."

Mike glanced up, apple still shoved halfway into his mouth. He took a bite and chewed quickly so he could answer.

"I'll call her later. I'm going to Will's."

"You need a ride?" Karen asked as she tied off the braid in her hands. "I'm getting ready to go to the store, be leaving in about fifteen minutes."

That would take too long. Mike had to go see Will *now*.

"No thanks, I'm gonna ride my bike."

"Wear a helmet please," she called after her son as Mike hurried away, taking another bite of his apple.

"O-kay!" he called in return, rolling his eyes.

Mike hopped on his bike, tossed the apple core into the bushes, and started pedaling (the helmet still in its spot in the garage). He pumped his legs, enjoying the feel of the sun and wind on his face as he coasted downhill and around the corner towards the Byers home. Mike was sweating again now from the excursion of pedaling (a welcome change from the cold, fearful sweat that had coated him when he woke). He rounded the corner and felt his heart lift when he saw Will's house just down the way. He'd talk to Will soon, actually see his face and know that all it had been was a dream.

Mike pulled up and let his bike fall unceremoniously onto the walkway that led to the front door of the Byers home. He looked around, scanning the yard for Will (where was he?). After failing to find his friend in the front, Mike wandered around to the back, still searching. Nothing. Mike strode up to Will's bedroom window (where he'd snuck in countless nights after a fight with his parents) and pressed his hands against the glass to see in. Will's room was empty, his sketchbook still open on his bed and his pajamas forgotten on the floor. Mike furrowed his brow and made his way back to the front of the house to knock on the door.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and waited until Will's mom opened the door and blinked up at him.

"Hi Mike. You looking for Will?"

"Yes Ma'am, is he home?"

Joyce rubbed her head, pushing her hair away from her face.

"No, he left a few hours ago."

"Did he go to Castle Byers? Or to Lucas's?"

Joyce looked like she was thinking about it, unsure. Her mind had been a little scattered lately, distracted.

"No, the quarry I think. He wanted to swim and said the pool was too crowded."

Mike hesitated, smile faltering a little.

"Alone?"

"I think so. Jonathan is at work and Will said you and Lucas have been so busy lately," Joyce confirmed, fiddling with the magnet in her hand.

Mike shifted, a gnawing, uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. Mike looked down at his feet and shuffled them, itching to leave but not wanting to be rude. Mrs. Byers looked at him and tilted her head.

“You okay? You want some lemonade or anything? You look a little pale.”

“No thank you, Ma’am.”

“Are you going to head over to the quarry?” she asked, shifting the magnet from one hand to the other.

“Yeah, probably.”

“When you see Will, can you tell him that dinner is at seven?”

“Sure,” Mike agreed, still itching to leave, actually fidgeting now, having trouble keeping his hands in his pockets.

“Thanks Hun.”

Mike turned and hurried back to his discarded bike and mounted it quickly to head out again. Why did he feel so anxious? They went swimming together all the time. Yeah, *together*, not alone, not after... after The Upsidedown (not after the body was found). Mike pedaled harder, legs burning as he cut through the treeline and woods, trying to save time. His stomach settled a little when he saw the quarry, when he saw Will’s bike and his bookbag next to it. Mike pulled up next to Will’s bike and dismounted his own, letting it drop to the ground as his eyes scanned the water for signs of his friend.

He didn’t see any movement, the water was calm and still. Mike stood frozen, heart thumping heavily as he watched for something, *anything* and then his heart stopped all together. Something was floating in the water, pale skin visible over the gentle wake and waves.

Mike took a step forward, vision blurring as it narrowed to pinpricks. He felt like he was moving in slow motion, like he was watching himself being pulled by an invisible thread, an observer, rather than actually being the one to take those first steps into the water and toward that drifting form he knew so well. His legs were heavy and Mike barely felt he had command of himself, mastery of his own limbs as he started swimming out, not caring that he still wore his shoes and all of his clothes. Mike kept his eyes on the still and quiet

figure in the water, only concentrating on getting to him and confirming what his panicked brain was telling him he was seeing.

Mike swam, struggling to drag himself through the water, struggling to keep his eyes on Will who was floating maybe fifty feet away.

*No. No. No no no nononono. Not again. **Not again.***

Mike was panicking, splashing uselessly as he tried to get closer but it felt like invisible hands were holding him still, dragging him further away the harder he tried to close the distance between himself and Will. Mike took a gulp of air and kicked hard, having difficulty keeping his head up far enough over the wake to keep his eyes on the other teen. Mike tilted his face up, towards the sky to keep both his nose and mouth above water and he felt pinpricks in the corners of his eyes from the sheer frustration he felt in this moment. He hated this, how useless and slow and heavy he was, weighed down by his sneakers and jean shorts and he snarled in frustration, letting out an angry sound while he tried to navigate to where he'd seen Will's body floating in the calm water.

Mike was sinking and he was slow and *he couldn't get to Will*. He *had* to get to Will and drag him to shore and shake him awake. Will couldn't do this to Mike again. Mike couldn't handle this, not *again*. Mike had already lost Will what, two, three times before? Mike cried out in frustration and panic and kicked harder.

He jerked, startled when actual, physical hands gripped his t-shirt and pulled him up, letting his whole head rise up out of the water instead of just his nose and mouth. Mike blinked, trying to reorient himself and jerked again when he saw someone staring at him from half a foot away. Mike reached out, clutched at the wrists where the other boy held him by the shirt, keeping him afloat. Mike pulled himself closer, trying to clear his vision and focus on the person holding him.

Will. It was Will. It was Will's hands on him and Will's legs kicking and churning the water around Mike and it was Will holding them both up, scrawny as he was.

"Mike, what the hell? Are you okay? What are you doing?" the

smaller teen asked, confusion clouding his features.

Mike swallowed and cleared his throat as Will released him and pedaled himself back and away to give his friend some space now that Mike wasn't flailing frantically and had his whole head and shoulders were above the water. Mike stared at Will, at his confused expression and puppy eyes and lashed out, shoving him roughly back, startling the brunet.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Mike demanded, anger flooding him as Will stared, mouth agape.

"What? What's wrong with *me*? What the hell is wrong with *you*?" Will snapped, angry now. "What are you doing out here in the quarry, fully clothed and halfway to drowning? What the hell, Mike?" he asked again, confusion turning to anger.

Mike grit his teeth, trying to calm himself and his flood of irrational emotions. He pursed his lips and huffed, still tired from biking all the way out here and then swimming while weighed down by his clothes. Mike pushed the anger aside and looked at Will, calmer this time.

The other teen was still treading water a few feet away, brow furrowed, mouth tight. His brown eyes were narrowed and he had a hurt look on his face (stop looking at me like that, how am I supposed to think clearly when you're giving me that look?) from Mike lashing out at him. Mike took a breath and cleared his throat, uncomfortable.

"What are you doing out here?" Will asked again, raising a hand to indicate Mike and his soaking clothes that still tried to weigh him down.

Mike kicked, still tired and the anxiety he felt was fleeing, replaced with guilt for his behavior. He shrugged noncommittally and looked away from Will's face, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. He focused instead on the moles that decorated Will's throat, on his skinny shoulders, tinted red from the sun, and tried to organize his thoughts. He couldn't.

"Come on, you can't swim like that," Will finally said, touching

Mike's arm to get his attention. "You're gonna drown."

You're the one who's gonna drown if I leave. You did once before. I saw you. You were dead and cold and so white-

Mike shook his head and caught Will by the wrist again. He was solid and warm and alive and moving as he pulled himself and Mike towards the shore. Mike held tighter, afraid to let go and used Will to help hold himself up as they both swam.

"You scared the shit out of me," Mike finally said, keeping his eyes on Will's arm rather than his face. "I thought you were dead."

Will slowed his kicking and looked back at Mike who still held on to him.

"What? I'm fine."

Mike tightened his hold again, pulled Will closer and resisted the urge to touch his face, to examine him and make sure it was actually *Will* in there, not the Flayer or some well crafted decoy made at the lab. Will let himself be pulled, let Mike look at him to his satisfaction, even used a hand to balance himself against the taller teen's elbow while he waited for Mike to finish looking him over.

"Are you okay?" Will asked, trying to get Mike to speak.

"You were dead. I saw your body," Mike tried to explain, to rationalize his behavior.

Will just looked at him, concern returning to his face.

"Mike, I'm fine."

"Why the hell are you out here alone? This is where they found your body, where they dragged you out of the water. I *saw* it, Will. I saw you and you were dead and *I saw it*. You can't come out here alone."

Will hesitated, unsure of how to respond.

"Mike, *I'm fine*. That wasn't me. I'm alive, I'm right here."

"I saw you Will. I saw your *body*. I can't do that again. You can't come out here by yourself. If you drowned I'd never get over it, I'd never forgive myself," Mike said, shaking Will's arm a little to emphasize his point. "You *can't*."

Will kicked slowly, not wanting to argue but not seeming to be especially appreciative of how Mike was trying to control him, telling him what he could and couldn't do.

"Hey, I'm okay, I'm fine. I'm not dead. Mike, I'm right here," Will assured his friend, squeezing Mike's elbow to show the statement to be true. "Besides, I swim out here by myself all the time."

Mike chewed the inside of his cheek, eyes darting to Will's. He knew it was true, that Will was alive and well and right here. Mike looked him over again, saw the recognition in his face, the familiarity. Mike sighed and released the other teen's wrist.

"S-sorry. I just got freaked out."

"Well, now you're freaking me out. Come on, let's get back to shore, you're soaking," Will said, tugging on Mike's shirt to encourage his friend to move, to keep swimming.

It wasn't far, maybe twenty yards but it was slow work with how weighed down Mike was. Will made it to shore first, exiting the water and immediately crouched down to open his bookbag. Mike watched him, watched his boney back, the moles there, and started shivering.

Mike stripped off his clothes beginning with his shoes and shirt and kicked them aside. Will looked over his shoulder at the taller teen and threw his own dry shirt in Mike's direction. Mike caught it, none too gracefully, and blinked.

"I didn't bring an extra towel. You can dry off with that," Will explained, looking away.

Mike hesitated.

"I don't want to get your stuff wet."

Will shrugged but didn't turn back around.

“I don’t mind. We can leave it out to dry while we wait on yours.”

Mike looked at the shirt a moment before using it to wipe his face and hair (it smelled good, like Will’s deodorant and the laundry detergent Mrs. Byers used) and then ran it over his chest and arms. Mike kicked his shorts off and leaned over to retrieve his things to lay out to dry. Will was using the towel to dry his own hair, mashing it up beneath the fabric, leaving it fluffy and unruly. Mike looked away, suddenly very uncomfortable in his own skin.

He’d been disrobed in front of Will dozens, hundreds of times over the years. They’d swum together, played on slip n slides, changed in front of each other during gym class, and swapped pajamas at sleep overs. This just, this felt different. Will was in his swimsuit (a totally appropriate clothing choice for his activities) and Mike was shuffling uncomfortably in his underwear. It just... It felt weird.

Mike shifted, using the shirt as a shield, holding it in front of himself in discomfort while Will spread out the towel longways and flopped down on it. Will tilted his head back and closed his eyes, letting the sun warm him while Mike watched. After a time of Mike just watching him, Will opened his eyes again and glanced over at his friend.

“Come on, this is gonna take forever. You were wearing jeans for Christ’s sake. Sit down,” Will said, patting the open spot of towel Will had left open for Mike to sit on.

Mike chewed his lip and Will quirked an eyebrow as if to ask ‘why are you being such a freak right now? Why are you making this weird?’. Because this wasn’t inherently weird, Will wasn’t making it weird, Mike was, because Mike was a weirdo and a freak. Who cares if he was in his underwear in front of a friend? It wasn’t any more revealing than a swimsuit and even if it was, Will wasn’t looking at Mike; not like *that* anyway. Why was he letting it make him uncomfortable and nervous and feel so exposed?

Mike pushed the feeling aside and sat, still using the shirt as a makeshift blanket to protect himself, to hide his nakedness. Will lay back and stretched his hands high above his head. He let out a soft sigh and closed his eyes, not bothering to look Mike over or make a

snarky remark about his state of undress. Mike stayed sitting, just watching Will, watching his chest rise and fall as he breathed.

After a second, Mike looked away, embarrassed that he'd been looking for so long, that he'd been so concerned with Will's breathing. Will was fine, why was Mike so worried about it? Was it because of that dream, the one where Will was gone again and only The Flayer remained? Because Mike remembered it now, the dream. It was horrible. Mike was in the basement sitting across from a body that looked like Will, talked at Mike the way Will did, but Mike didn't recognize it. It moved, breathed, and watched Mike in a way he didn't understand or know. It's brown eyes were distant, unseeing, unfamiliar and it was *cold* when Mike touched it.

Where was Will? It wasn't here, in that body that pretended to be Will Byers.

Mike twitched and blinked, trying to repress the memory of the dream and looked back down at his friend. Will was still reclined, relaxing as his skin and hair dried. Mike shivered again and turned away. He wasn't going to dry if he didn't lay down and try to absorb the sun the way Will was and Will's shirt wouldn't dry either if he didn't stop using it like a shield. Reluctantly, Mike dropped the shirt and lay down next to his friend.

Both were quiet for a long time and Mike began to wonder if Will had dozed off, fallen asleep in the warm summer sun. Mike didn't want to wake him so he just watched the trees sway overhead, trying to quiet his thoughts. He blinked when he felt Will roll over and brush against him as the smaller teen adjusted himself. He was warm, so much warmer than The Mindflayer had been in Mike's dream. Warm and safe and well, nothing lurking beneath the surface. The Flayer was dead and Will was fine.

Mike wanted to touch him, to gain further confirmation, but he didn't. Boys didn't do that, touch each other for comfort or affection unless it was a quick hug or a slap on the back, even if they cared about each other. And Mike cared about Will, of course he did. Will was one of his closest friends, but he couldn't just *reach out* and *touch* him (even if he wanted to).

Because Mike did; he did want to touch Will. Mike wanted to lean against Will when he was tired, or sling an arm over his shoulder when they snuck into the movies together, or rub Will's back when the other teen started squirming in his sleep those nights Mike snuck in. But that wasn't normal, that wasn't okay to do (that was something freaks and fairies did). That was something that only girls and guys could do together and even though it was nice to do with El, Mike felt a little sad for Will. Will didn't have a girlfriend he could do that with, hadn't even seemed interested in finding one. And he could have if he'd wanted to.

Will was smart and funny and sweet and good looking with his soft brown eyes and cute little moles and full lips and his smile that could light up a room. Hell, Will could get a really great girlfriend if he wanted one, Mike was sure of that. Didn't he want that physical affection? Mike could give Will all the emotional affection he was able to, but didn't Will want to be held and kissed and be touched? Mike wasn't allowed to do that stuff with him (even if he *really* wanted to). It didn't really seem fair, the gay virus. How was it fair that guys could get each other sick just from doing all the things a guy and girl could do together? His dad told him it was God punishing them for their sins, for their transgressions. That scared Mike because he knew that if his father hadn't told him, hadn't set him on the right path, that Mike might have gotten sick too.

Because he'd thought about it, about offering to let Will practice kissing with him (just until Will found a girlfriend). Mike knew people did that with their friends. When Mike was ten he saw Nancy and her friends doing it at a sleepover, taking turns and laughing the whole time. Mike had watched for a minute, fascinated and curious until Nancy threw a pillow at him and slammed the door on him, declaring him a perv.

Mike didn't mean to be perverted, he was just entranced and excited that people would do that, practice kissing with their friends, that they were allowed to. It *really* didn't seem fair that the gay virus only affected men, like there was something inherently wrong and evil with them. Mike would have liked to practice kissing with Will if he could have, would have enjoyed touching Will and showing him how to tilt his head just so, how to open his mouth and explore, where he

should put his hands and maybe hear what sounds Will would make, what he'd he taste like... But Mike didn't want to get Will sick. It would kill him if Will got sick or hurt because of something *he* did to his friend. Will had been through enough without Mike adding to it. Will really needed a girlfriend. If he had one, Mike could stop thinking about this, obsessing over it.

Mike blinked and looked down at Will who was on his stomach now, hands folded under his head like a pillow, and he was looking up at Mike.

"Sorry if I scared you," Will whispered, eyes heavy and tired.

Mike glanced down at his friend, at his lips, and then back up again.

"It's okay. Sorry I yelled at you," he apologized meekly, embarrassed at his behavior.

"It's okay."

"I was being a jerk. I just, I had a bad dream and then I saw you floating in the water..."

Will laughed, crinkling his nose when he did.

"You were dreaming about me?"

Mike frowned, upset that Will was making fun of him.

"It's not funny. It was really messed up," he tried to explain. "So just shut up and accept my apology already."

Will shifted again, rolled onto his side and rested his hand on Mike's arm, giving it a squeeze to reassure him (Will didn't mind touching him).

"Hey, I'm fine. It's okay that you yelled. I'm honestly fine, Mike."

Mike closed his eyes and didn't pull away from the touch.

"Okay, good. So you're not going to swim alone anymore, right? You'll call me?"

Will didn't speak for a minute and Mike opened his eyes to watch the other teen.

"What? What's wrong?"

"You um, you've been busy with El and all. I don't have anyone to swim with cause Dustin's not around and you're busy with El and Lucas only hangs out with Max these days. I've been doing it alone all summer. You're never home anymore, I think your mom is getting tired of me calling."

"So call me on the radio. I'll bring it with me."

Will paused again and dropped his hand from where it rested on Mike's arm (don't do that, stay. It's okay).

"You don't have to do that," the other boy said, breaking eye contact to look away.

"I want to. I don't want you out here alone anymore, okay? So you call me, anytime you want to go swimming and I'll be there, okay?"

Will twisted to roll over and looked up, back at the trees instead of at Mike. He looked uncomfortable, unsure, but a little pleased. A slight red sunburn (or flush) was creeping across his cheeks and he cleared his throat.

"Okay."

"Promise?" Mike asked, resisting the urge to touch Will, to make him look at Mike, make him understand how serious this was.

Mike couldn't lose Will, he just couldn't. Not to drowning and not to the Mind Flayer. Will being alone upped the chances that something would happen to him and Mike felt a swell of guilt that he'd been too busy to even *notice* that Will had spent most of the summer by himself. How many times had Will been in the quarry alone? How many hours had he spent just floating in the water, no one around to make sure he was okay?

"Yeah, I promise."

“Okay. Good,” Mike said, rolling onto his own stomach to let the sun dry him while he chewed his own cheek again, wondering how he could make this right, make up for all his neglect.

He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the water, the sounds of Will breathing and felt a little angry with himself. He knew he didn’t have the right to ask, to dictate what Will did. He’d been the one who’d been absent, unavailable. Still, it bothered him that Will had given up, stopped trying to call him. They were supposed to be friends and friends didn’t give up on each other. Mike had never given up on Will; not when he was lost in The Upsidedown and not when The Mindflayer had him and watched the world through Will’s eyes. He jerked, startled when Will spoke again.

“Ring ring.”

“What?” Mike asked, blinking at his friend who was back to his stomach, watching him.

“That’s the phone. I’m calling you.”

“Oh, uh, hello?” Mike replied, feeling a little foolish.

“Hey, wanna go swimming?”

Mike blinked again, confused. He licked his lips and wiggled against the still damp towel.

“We just got dry.”

“Your clothes are still soaking and it’s hot out here. I want to swim. You said I couldn’t swim alone, you made me promise. So get up,” Will demanded, poking Mike hard in the ribs and making him jump a little.

Mike grinned and grabbed Will by the shoulder, holding him down against the towel while Mike used his friend for leverage. Mike held Will firm and pushed himself to his feet, feeling a vague pang of disappointment when he released his hold on the smaller teen and stumbled up and away from him. Will laughed and rolled over, finding his own footing and bent to brush the sand from his knobby knees. Will looked up at Mike, meeting his eyes playfully.

“Wanna race?”

“What, to the water?”

“No, to Hawkins High,” Will said, rolling his eyes.

Mike grinned and offered a half shrug, waiting for Will to try and pass him as the other teen made a run for the water before Mike grabbed him by the shoulder again and shoving him back playfully. Mike took off sprinting, feeling the sand between his toes as Will shouted a protest at being delayed by Mike’s shove.

“Hey, that’s cheating!”

“You cheated first!” Mike reminded him, still laughing as he ran.

To his surprise, Will caught him up to easily and overtook him, hitting the water before Mike and leaving him on the shore while Will dove deep into the placid quarry. He paused, watching the water while Will was under, waiting for him to emerge. The lanky teen fought down that little trickle of anxiety that tried to rise up and choke him while he waited. When Will broke the surface and turned, laughing, Mike smiled.

“What? You give up just because you knew you wouldn’t win?” Will called, a smirk on his pretty lips.

Mike grinned.

“No, I’m coming. I’ll be there soon.”

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike goes to fetch Will and reflects on the difficulties of growing up

Notes for the Chapter:

CW: mentions of abuse.

He hadn't heard the phone ring, and if the radio had made any sound at all it was drowned out by the pulsing music in his headphones. He lay there, just listening, halfway between sleep and wakefulness, and daydreamed. He thought about the end of summer, about whether or not he'd be able to pass all the AP classes he'd tested into, and whether or not he'd be able to save enough money for a Sega Mark III (if it ever managed to make it from Japan to the states at all). He'd probably been there for hours, just listening to the music and totally zoned out before his mom pulled the headphones off his ears. Mike glared up at her as she stood next to his bed and tapped her foot impatiently.

"What?" he asked with irrational irritability; the same he'd felt for months.

"I've been calling you for ten minutes. Dinner's almost ready."

"Okay, I'll be down in a minute," Mike grumbled as he rolled onto his side, back to his mother.

Karen rolled her eyes, exasperated with her son and his newfound moodiness. Mike could feel the expression even if he couldn't see it. He knew Nancy had been a handful when she hit puberty, he was old enough to remember it. Her hormones had come out in fits of anger in tears though, with thrown objects and endless nights of sobbing. Mike's were all lethargy, apathy, and sullen bouts of withdrawal. Mike knew he was difficult to deal with right now, even if he didn't mean to be, but shouldn't his parents be used to it by now? It wasn't like it would be any easier when Holly got older. They may as well

buckle up, they had about six more years of this at least.

It wasn't entirely his fault though, so Mike refused to take all of the blame. No one had told him that growing up would be... so much. Every feeling was magnified, and everything changed almost overnight. No one told him that getting older wouldn't be just pimples and facial hair. No one prepared him for the growing pains that throbbed in his legs nightly after he shot up three inches in six months and kept him awake for hours after he wanted to sleep. He knew his voice would drop but no one told him it would crack and squeak with no explanation and only get worse the more emotional he got. And the *emotions*, they were *out of control*. Forget the horniness and the random boners that would show up unwelcome every time his jeans rubbed him the wrong way or he saw a flash of skin; the emotions were the real problem.

Everything hurt his feelings. Everything pissed him off. He and Lucas had always butted heads from time to time, even as kids, but now they were like wolves; all snapping teeth and flying fur. Dustin tried to keep the peace but he was gone again for another summer at camp so he couldn't stop the fights that sometimes ended with bloody noses and bruised pride. Will wouldn't take a side; in fact he was hardly around *at all* anymore. Maybe he had gotten too tired of the bickering. Maybe he had other reasons for avoiding them. Max and El suddenly becoming 'BFFs' hadn't helped anything as far as hurt feelings went. El had broken up with him *three times* in as many weeks at Max's urging, and it was getting tiresome trying to win her back whenever she did. He was starting to wonder if it was even worth it anymore.

"Can I have my headphones back?" he mumbled, not having the energy to actually reach for them.

"I thought you were coming down for dinner."

Mike sighed, an over exaggerated sound so he could be sure his mom would know just how annoying she was being right now.

"Dinner's not ready yet, is it?"

"No, but you could set the table for me," Karen pointed out.

“So could Nancy.”

“I’m asking *you*.”

Mike rolled his eyes so hard and so far back he could have sworn he saw his spine. Karen laid the headphones on his end table and ran her hand over it. Where all of Mike’s figurines and comic books had been. The space was cleared away to make room for the stereo and deodorant, cheap drugstore cologne and hair gel. She looked at her son, his back turned to her as it was so often was these days, and sighed.

“Please?”

“Fine, whatever,” he mumbled again and rolled from his bed to stand.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Mike, what’s going on with you?” she demanded, crossing her arms.

He shrugged, noncommittal. What was he supposed to say? Everything just... sucked. Even things he used to like were annoying now. The idea of getting out of bed was exhausting. Getting The Party together for a game night was too much of a time commitment. Even the sounds of birds chirping in the morning grated his nerves. He looked at his mom and didn’t have any way to defend himself or justify his behavior.

“You can talk to me. You know that, right?”

Mike shrugged again.

“I know.”

“I’m right here,” she pressed and Mike finally looked at her.

He knew his mom was trying to reconnect with him and that he was hurting her with every eye roll, every sigh; every rejection. He didn’t mean to. His mom had always been his favorite parent. She had

always been the one to hold him close and tend his wounds. She was the one he'd cry to when things were wrong and she was the first person he showed off his report cards to. Karen wasn't even being that bad right now, she just wanted him to set the table. She wanted her little boy back.

"I know Mom. Sorry, I'm just... sorry," he offered lamely.

Karen shifted her weight and looked around the room. Mike followed her gaze, wondering what it was she was looking for. His room was untidy but it was clean enough to keep him from being grounded. It wasn't like he was hiding any dirty magazines or jerk off socks (Mike knew how to do his own laundry, thank you very much), and most of his school work was stacked on the desk with the Cs just as visible as the As. Mike watched his mom, really took a moment to try and see her. She looked tired. Her mouth was tight and her eyes were a little red. Mike took a step towards her and paused. She looked so small now. It wasn't that long ago that when he hugged her, she could pull him to her chest and he'd bury his head under her arms and hide. Now he had almost four inches on her and the best he could do was hope to hide in her hair.

"Mom?"

"Yeah Hun?"

"I'll set the table," he said, apologetic.

"Thank you," she said and gave his arm a gentle squeeze.

Mike slipped past her while Karen lingered in his room. He felt vaguely guilty but couldn't place why. It wasn't like he'd actually *done* anything. He didn't slack off on his chores or cuss his parents out. At least he wasn't out getting wasted every weekend or chucking rocks at cars or something stupid like that. The worst thing he did was sneak into the movies without paying and *once* let his hand wander a little high on El's chest before she pushed it away again. It's not like he was out doing drugs and having unprotected sex (or any sex for that matter). If anything, they should be *grateful* that he spent so much time in his room listening to music and brooding. So why did Karen always look at him like she was about to burst into tears

these days?

Mike pushed the thoughts away and did what he was asked; he set the table, bowed his head while Ted said grace, and waited to be excused. He sat in silence and chewed his food without tasting it and let his mind wander; to the start of the new school year, to the pretty girl he'd seen at the skatepark, and to his friends (scattered as they were now). The phone ringing was the only thing that roused him from his thoughts.

"Really? In the middle of dinner?" Ted asked, finally looking up from his newspaper.

"I've got it," Nancy said as she rose to her feet with a quick smile around the table.

Mike poked at his food, uninterested in it or the phone. It was probably a telemarketer or Jonathan.

"Hello, Wheeler residence, this is Nancy speaking. Oh, hi Will. Yeah, he's here-"

"-We're in the middle of dinner!" Ted called.

"-But we're eating right now. Can he call you ba-"

Mike was already at the phone, ignoring the protest from his father and a huff of annoyance from Nancy as he shoved her aside. He wrestled the phone away from her, an easier feat now that he had the height advantage, and brought it to his ear while she glared at him. He didn't bother to return the look, instead he turned his back on the family, to have at least some privacy.

"-Sorry, I'll call later-"

"-Will, hey. Hang on," Mike interrupted. "I'm here. What's up?"

"Sorry, I didn't realize what time it was. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Mike scrunched his nose and waved a hand that his friend couldn't see.

"It's fine, we're almost done. What's up? When did you get back?" he asked, wrapping the cord around his fingers to twist it.

"About an hour ago..."

Mike frowned. Will sounded weird. Mike knew his friend hadn't exactly been *thrilled* to be on a court ordered visit with his dad after Lonnie's desperate bid to get his child support reduced by requesting joint custody with Joyce, but this sounded like more than annoyance at a wasted weekend. Mike shifted, turned further away as Ted started calling for him to come back to the table.

"An hour ago? I thought your mom wasn't picking you up until tomorrow."

"She didn't. I took the bus."

"The bus? Wait, where are you? You're not home yet?" Mike asked, confused.

"I'm still at the hub downtown, I'm using the payphone. Mom and Jonathan are still at work..."

"So you've been sitting there for an *hour*?" Mike asked, eyes widening. "Why didn't you call when you got in?"

Downtown wasn't necessarily a *great* area. The way adults always acted like it was the very epicenter of sin. All kinds of people passed through there; seasonal workers, regular travelers, grifters, and con men. Mike had even heard more than one whispered story about drugs and sex being traded there on the cheap (though he didn't know how true any of those were). Mike chewed his lip, suddenly anxious.

"I um... I did. Your dad said he didn't think you were home."

Mike cast an angry glance at his father and resisted the urge to flick him off.

"Okay, hang on," he said, glancing out the window at the falling sun. "I'll be there in a few."

"It's okay. Mom get's off at nine."

"Will, are you kidding? That's in like, three hours. No way am I letting you sit there by yourself that long. Just sit tight, I'll come get you."

Silence, then quietly;

"Thanks."

"Yeah, you got it," Mike said, ear still pressed to the phone. "Just hang on, I'm on my way."

"Okay."

Mike frowned again. Will *really* didn't sound right. His voice was small and soft, tight. He'd never really been a chatterbox unless he was DMing a campaign, but these one word answers were raising red flags.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Mike didn't believe that for a second.

"Okay," he whispered. "I'll see you soon."

"Thanks."

Mike hung up the phone just as Ted stepped up behind him to take it. Mike glared at him and his father returned the look.

"Michael, you know I've been calling you."

"Sorry. I need a ride."

"Is that a joke? We're in the middle of dinner."

"I'm not hungry. Can I have a ride please?"

Ted stared at him like Mike was speaking in tongues.

“Absolutely not. Sit down and finish your food.”

Mike hesitated and looked at his mom. Karen cleared her throat.

“It’s okay. If he’s not hungry then-”

“-It’s not okay, Karen. You worked hard on this lovely meal and he can’t just duck out in the middle of it. It’s disrespectful.”

Mike fought hard not to roll his eyes and looked at his mom again, imploring. She looked him over, her expression unreadable. Something on his face must have given away the urgency he felt, because she turned back to Ted, annoyed.

“Ted, it’s *fine*. I can drive you, Hun.”

“No, you can’t Karen. You worked hard and you deserve the chance to sit down with your family,” Ted said with a pointed look at his son.

Mike clenched his jaw.

“Fine. I’ll take my bike.”

“Young man, I thought I made myself clear. You’re not leaving until you’ve cleaned your plate and cleared your dishes.”

Mike starred, angry. He didn’t want to pick a fight, but he didn’t really have time to waste. It was already going to take longer to ride the bike than it would have been to have someone drive him. He really didn’t want to keep Will waiting any longer than he had to, not alone. An uncontrollable swell of emotion rose in him, bubbled to the surface and Mike stood a little straighter. He wasn’t a little kid anymore, Ted couldn’t dictate his every move.

“No.”

“What?”

“Dad, this is important. I need to go. Mom,” he said, looking at Karen. “I’m sorry. Dinner was great but I *really* have to go. I’m sorry.”

Mike turned, slipped away before Ted could grab him and ran for the door. He only stopped to grab his shoes before he jumped on his bicycle, shoes still in hand. Distantly, he heard Ted shouting at him and for a second, he felt panicked; and then, free. Had he really just done that? God, the trouble he was about to be in...

Mike laughed; threw his head back in a full body, joyous whoop as he coasted down the hill away from his house. When he was out of sight, Mike pulled over to pull on his shoes. Downtown was maybe a twenty minute ride, but with the adrenaline pumping through him, Mike felt sure he made it in record time. Even so, it took him longer than he would have liked to locate his friend once he got there, and for a second, Mike worried Will hadn't waited for him. Mike stood on his toes and craned his neck to search, eyes scanning the crowd and hesitating every time he saw a flash of straight brown hair. Mike brightened, then immediately darkened again when he finally located the smaller teen.

Will was sitting on a bench by the buses, backpack between his feet, looking at his shoes. He had his shoulders hunched around him, his jacket tugged close despite the warm weather. He was sharing a bench with someone and passing a cigarette back and forth between them. Mike dropped his bike and padded over quickly, deeply unnerved to see Will of all people sharing a smoke with a stranger.

The man next to Will noticed Mike before his friend did; he looked up and smiled. Will followed the motion. He glanced up at Mike, the hood of his jacket shadowing his face, and spoke.

"Hey," Will offered as he scooted away from the smoking man. "You came."

"Yeah. You okay?"

"I'm fine," Will said with a half hearted smile.

Mike glanced at the unknown man, unsure.

"This a friend of yours?" the man asked, still grinning as he looked at Mike.

“Yeah. He’s the one I was waiting for,” Will said softly. He looked past the taller teen, searching. “Is your mom here?”

“No. I took my bike,” Mike said, suddenly deeply uncomfortable that he didn’t have a car to jump into and speed away with.

The man on the bench shifted forward and Mike almost took a step back automatically.

“No wheels, huh? That’s rough. You know,” he said, turning to Will. “That offer for a ride still stands,” he said with a grin. “For both of you.”

Mike felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He couldn’t say why, but something about this guy was making his hackles rise. He looked at Will who was back to looking at his shoes.

“We’re fine, thanks.”

“Oh come on. Two kids like you alone without a ride? Here? You looking to get killed?”

No. That’s exactly why I want to get away from you as soon as possible.

“Hey, I’m not trying to scare you,” the man laughed easily when he saw the look Mike gave him. “But something could happen, you know? Come on, you can throw your bike in the trunk and I’ll drop you off.”

Will squirmed and started tugging at the straps of his bookbag.

“It’s okay. Thanks though.”

“C’m on. Where are you headed?” the man asked, insistent.

“Home. My mom’s expecting me. She knows where we are,” Mike said slowly as he edged away from the stranger and closer to Will. He extended his hand to motion for his friend to stand. “We’re all set.”

Will started to come to him and the man leaned back.

“Have it your way. I have some primo grass at my place. Could give

you guys some. Looks like you could use something to take the edge off.”

“We’re good,” Mike said again as he gripped his friend by the hand to help the other teen to his feet and pulled Will behind him.

The man looked them over and Mike felt himself start to shake with just how uncomfortable the whole interaction was making him. The man smiled, shrugged, and stood. Mike took a step back, bumped into Will to make room (and put space between them and the stranger).

“Okay. It’s all good. You boys change your mind, I’m around,” he said with a final drag on his cigarette.

He stepped past Mike, looked him over, and flicked his cigarette away. Mike held his ground, still a little shaky, and clenched his jaw as he watched the man leave. ‘I’m around’ sounded too much like a vaguely concealed threat, like he was waiting to see where Mike and Will were going. Mike kept his eyes trained, watching until Will gave his hand a squeeze to get his attention. Mike looked down at their interlaced fingers, visible for anyone in the crowded bus hub to see, and released the hold on his friend. He shoved his hands quickly into his pockets and looked up but Will was looking away, his own hands loose at his sides.

“Come on. I wanna get you home.”

It was a little awkward riding like that. Mike hadn’t had an extra body on his bicycle in a few years and Will’s unevenly packed bookbag made everything feel off balance. It didn’t help that Will was gripping the seat and teetering precariously while Mike cast glances over his shoulder; just to be sure they weren’t being followed. Mike pulled over when he was sure they were alone, planted his feet, and looked over his shoulder at his friend.

“You can hang on to me you know.”

“Okay.”

And that was better, but so much worse. Yeah, Mike didn’t have to

worry about losing his balance and toppling the bike, but the feeling of Will's hands on his waist, gripping his shirt and the press of his body against Mike's back were distracting. Mike tried to concentrate on just peddling, on just getting Will home. How well he succeeded in that endeavor was somewhat up for debate. When they finally reached the Byers home and dismounted, Will moved away and shuffled his feet, eyes still trained on them.

"Thanks."

"Yeah, no problem," Mike mumbled in return. "You okay? Really I mean."

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"You um, you didn't say why you came home early," Mike tried awkwardly. "And since when do you smoke?"

"Oh uh," Will kicked at the pebbles around his mom's garden. "I don't really. That guy offered and I didn't know how to say no without offending him," he finished with a shrug.

Mike watched Will's feet.

"And your dad? He didn't mind you leaving early?"

"I doubt it."

"So what, beer for breakfast and shots for dinner not all it's cracked up to be?" Mike joked, trying to break whatever this unwelcome tension that hung between them.

Will didn't laugh.

"Something like that."

Mike hesitated again. Will was speaking quietly and keeping his head down, like he didn't even want to look at Mike. Why? Because Mike had grabbed his hand without asking? Because of the jab at Lonnie? Will had never minded before. He used to laugh when Mike would try and lighten the mood when it came to Will's absentee father. Mike wasn't sure what he'd done wrong this time, why Will hadn't at

least smiled, so he kicked the ground too. Will hadn't sounded right on the phone and he wasn't acting normal now.

"So... your dad. What happened? Why'd you leave? Why didn't Lonnie bring you home?"

The shorter teen shrugged but didn't answer.

"Hey, we're friends. You can tell me if something happened," Mike whispered, mimicking what his mom had told him earlier.

Mike ducked his head, tried to get a better look at Will. The other boy pulled away and took a step back. When Will finally glanced up, Mike got his first look at him, as badly illuminated as he was under the dying light, and recoiled.

The left side of Will's face and jaw were discolored and raw. Will saw that move, the step away, and turned his face back to the ground. Mike followed, unwilling to drop the question and suddenly very, very angry. He reached out to grab his friend by the backpack and yank him closer, so he could get a better look at the injury, and Will slapped the touch away. Mike pulled his hand back, surprised at the strike.

"I'm sorry," Will said quickly, dropping his hand.

"It's... It's okay. Are *you* okay? What happened?" Mike asked, gentler this time.

"My dad um, he shoved me and I fell off the porch."

Mike didn't know what to say, so he stood, open mouthed and unmoving as he watched Will shrug his shoulders again. The mark on his face wasn't the only thing that was off about him. Will's clothes were rumpled and dirty, his usually neatly combed hair was a mess from more than just the wind. Mike chewed his lip and growled.

"That piece of shit. What the fuck is wrong with him?"

At the growl, Will flinched. It wasn't much movement, but enough for Mike to notice it. Okay, maybe raising his voice wasn't the best way to handle this right now. Mike shifted his weight, ducked his head to

make eye contact with Will, and softened again.

“Want me to bring your stuff inside?”

“I don’t know if I have my key. I think I might have lost it when I was getting my stuff packed,” the shorter teen explained, dejected. “But Mom will be here soon, so,” he sighed and sat down. “I’m good.”

“You’re just gonna sit out here?”

Will nodded and picked at the peeling paint of the porch. Mike sighed and plopped down next to him. He leaned back, planted his palms against the hard concrete, and leaned back to look at the sky. Will hugged his knees and rested his chin on them.

“What was the fight about?” Mike asked.

“What?”

“You know,” Mike said, motioning to his own face. “What was it about?”

“Oh,” Will said, eyes trained on the lawn. “It wasn’t really a fight. He just... those beers for breakfast weren’t great for our quality time,” he said softly. “So I wanted to come home.”

Mike sat quietly, not knowing what to say. He knew there was a fight waiting for him when he inevitably made his way home, but Ted had never laid a hand on any member of their family. Even when Ted had a drink or two, he barely ever raised his voice. Mike didn’t remember what things were like before, when Lonnie still lived with Joyce. Mostly, what he remembered was that he wasn’t allowed over unless Lonnie was at work. He knew that Joyce had gotten smacked around by her ex and that Jonathan had gotten into it with his dad as he got older, bigger, more able to defend himself and his mother. Mike didn’t know if Will ever got hit and by the time he was old enough to even understand what that might mean, Lonnie was long gone. Mike didn’t want to think about it, but with the evidence sitting right next to him, fuzzy, half memories surfaced; Will with bruises on his arms, on his back. Mike rubbed his head, angry with his seven year old self for not knowing, not realizing what it was.

He looked over at his friend, at his bruised and marred face, coat tucked tightly around himself, and felt ashamed. Were there more bruises hidden beneath the clothes? Will had been with Lonnie for three days. How many times had his dad gotten drunk and wailed on him before Will left? Mike crossed his arms and sighed.

“Okay. Well I’ll wait with you then”

“You don’t have to,” Will said quickly.

“It’s not a big deal. I left you alone for long enough already,” he said, the feeling of guilt still hanging over him. “My dad didn’t tell me you called. I would have come sooner.”

“It’s okay,” Will said as he rubbed his shoulder across his eyes.

Mike shook his head. He would never have left Will alone if he’d known, especially not with the creepy guy hanging around him. He ground his teeth together in another flare of anger.

“No, it’s not Will. Jesus, what if that guy had gotten you in his car and-”

Will bumped his shoulder against Mike’s arm, cutting him off.

“He didn’t. He wouldn’t have. I’m not dumb, Mike. I just didn’t want to piss him off by telling him to leave me alone. But um, thanks for showing up when you did. He was a little pushy.”

Mike nodded and leaned into the touch. There wasn’t anyone around to see it and besides, Will had let Mike hold his hand earlier. He probably wouldn’t mind Mike leaning against him now, would he?

Maybe he would. Will had been so distant lately. He hadn’t even wanted to share snacks at the movies, hadn’t wanted to have their hands brush as they both reached into the shared backpack. Neither of them curled up to share a blanket on the couch with the other when they watched movies anymore. Perhaps Mike was too clingy for how old they were. They weren’t kids anymore; maybe Mike needed to stop with all the unnecessary touching, no matter how good it felt.

Mike pulled away, reached over, and dragged Will’s bag towards

himself while Will watched.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for your keys. You said you didn’t know if you had them, but we haven’t even checked yet. So I’m looking for them.”

Mike started pulling things free and handing them to Will who looked uncomfortable but didn’t protest. Nothing was folded and the ziplock bag Will had put most of his toiletries in wasn’t closed. They’d had enough sleep overs, Mike knew this wasn’t how Will usually packed his things. He really must have left in a hurry. Mike pulled out the sketchbook and pencil case to add to the growing pile on Will’s lap, and shook the bag. There, he heard the keys. Mike extracted them proudly and held them up.

“Found em.”

“Thanks,” Will mumbled as he started shoving his things back in his bag.

Mike wilted, lowered his hand. Will wasn’t looking at him and he looked a little red. Was he embarrassed? Maybe Mike had overstepped. He shouldn’t have just taken Will’s bag and started digging through it like it was his own. Mike dropped the keys next to his friend and looked away, suddenly embarrassed as well.

Will picked up the keys and stood, pulled his backpack over his shoulder. Mike stayed seated and watched as his friend unlocked the door. Will cracked it open before looking back at him. Sluggishly, still embarrassed, Mike rose to his feet. Will slipped in but Mike waited, unsure.

“Can I... is it okay if I come in?”

Will peaked out from the crack in the door.

“It’s a little messy.”

“Promise I won’t look.”

“Alright. Just... okay.”

Will stepped aside and Mike moved past him, careful not to touch. Will was overexaggerating about the mess; it wasn't like there were literal piles of garbage anywhere. The only thing that gave away that Joyce and the rest of the family hadn't been expecting guests were the piles of letters, mostly bills, scattered across the kitchen table. Mike didn't want to look, didn't want to be invasive. He knew the Byers weren't 'well off' and that they struggled from time to time, but he'd never asked about it. It wasn't any of his business if Karen sent home cooked meals with Mike over the holidays to drop off for Will and Jonathan when Joyce had to work. It wasn't his business that Will had been picking up job applications lately, and neither one of them mentioned it when Mike would slip Will a few bucks when The Party wanted to get together and do things that cost actual money.

Will shut the door and headed towards his room, Mike on his heels to flop down on the bed while Will dropped his bag to the floor and flicked on the lights. Mike blinked as his eyes adjusted and let out an audible sound at the sight of his friend. Will had shrugged off his jacket and stood, fully illuminated in nothing but his t-shirt and shorts.

The raw skin wasn't isolated to his face. The entire left side of Will's body was covered in what looked like road rash. If Mike didn't know what happened, he'd assume Will had fallen off his bike at full speed and eaten asphalt in a big way. Mike stood and moved toward his friend, heart thudding uncomfortably in anger and shock. Will glanced down at himself and forced a smile.

"Looks pretty bad, huh?"

Mike didn't know how to respond. Lonnie had done this? To his own kid? Jesus, that was... that was just...

What was it about Will that made him such a victim? What made him the target for bullies, for harassment, for maltreatment from his own father, and for *literal goddamn monsters*?

"Will, *Jesus*, this is from one shove?"

Will looked down at his feet and kicked his shoes off.

"I mean, I fell onto the walkway and Lon- my dad- sort of dragged me to the street," he said with a shrug.

What? Why was Will being so nonchalant about this? What was up with that shrug and half laugh? Mike reached out to touch him and Will backed away.

"What do you mean? What the hell happened?"

"Dad drank too much and started talking and I guess he made himself mad..." Will said, avoiding the question. "So I left. Anyway, thanks for bringing me home."

Mike held his breath. That... didn't sound right. Not that he didn't think Will would run away if he was getting hurt (he was more likely to do that than actually fight back), but the fact that Lonnie had *dragged* him...

"You um... your dad threw you out, didn't he?" Mike asked quietly. "That's why your stuff's such a mess. That's why you didn't know if you had your keys."

Will glanced up, a little red around the eyes and nose.

"Yeah."

Mike reached out again and caught his smaller friend by the arm to examine it. Will was still covered in dirt, some of it in his open wounds. They stood motionless for a moment; Mike staring and Will doing an excellent job of avoiding eye contact. He didn't know what Will had done, *could* have possibly done to get thrown out. It didn't matter. Whatever reason Lonnie had to justify this wasn't enough. After a second, Will pulled his arm away.

"I need to shower. My mom's gonna be home soon," he mumbled.

"I could stay," Mike offered. "If you wanted me to. It's not a school night."

Will smiled, swayed a little closer (or was that Mike's imagination?), and looked up.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said, shuffling his feet again. “But... if you wanted to, that’s fine. Mom doesn’t know I’m home so... do you mind getting some snacks from the kitchen? I don’t know if my pajamas will fit you, you’re kinda,” Will made a motion to show their height difference and Mike flushed. “You’d probably have better luck in Jonathan’s room. Finding something that fit I mean,” he explained. “I sort of don’t want to talk to either of them tonight, so you should grab the food and clothes now if you want. We can just shut the door before they get home and pretend we aren’t here,” Will offered before turning his hazel eyes away again.

That... didn’t sound terrible. They could lock themselves in Will’s room, alone in the dark, and just lay quietly. They might be too old for it now, for sleepovers and midnight snacks, too mature for matching pajamas and ghost stories by flashlight. There might be hell to pay in the morning when Mike returned home and Will had to talk to his mom, but tonight, that sounded as close to perfect as things could get.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am fully aware that I should be working on TCB series, but I have horrible writer's block so here we are with another chapter of my pallet cleanse fic. Hopefully this will help me get on track again. I wouldn't expect this fic to be updated regularly, it's kind of just my go to when I am stuck on a different story. I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Comments and kudos are always appreciated. Please be well and take care of yourselves.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike finds a way to spend time with Will despite the growing distance in their friendship.

Notes for the Chapter:

CW: language, homophobia, internalized homophobia.

Mike was bored, *painfully* bored, and as was becoming the norm for him, moody. The midterm exams were next week and none of his friends had any time to do anything with him anymore. Dustin didn't need to study; he was smart enough to pass his exams without ever cracking a book open at all, but his mom wanted him taking AP classes that would earn him college credits next year, so he studied anyway. Lucas was too busy, locked in the library with Max most of the time while she tutored and teased him. Mike thought it was stupid to pretend to be dumb just so a girl would give him attention, but if it worked for Lucas, then it was what it was. Not even El wanted to hang out with him and even though she insisted it wasn't because of the breakup, he had his doubts.

Will was even worse than the rest because he had absolutely no time at all anymore, even on the weekends. He worked the dinner shift at Dot's Diner after school most nights before going home and trying to power through his homework. He stayed up so late trying to keep ahead of his assignments that he spent most of the time they could have spent together, in the two classes they shared, either asleep or nearly there. Mike used to think it was funny how easily Will fell asleep in class. He used to flick wads of paper at his friend just to see how accurate he could make his aim and how many he could hit Will with before he woke his sleeping friend up.

It wasn't really funny when Will would frown at him and just knock the paper off the desk and turn to face the other way.

Which was fine. It was fair that Will was tired and Mike understood it

on an intellectual level, but it still stung. Will's reactions to Mike's jokes, to his pestering to hang out, and his sudden and complete lack of interest in even getting The Party together over Spring Break to play a oneshot hurt more than Mike thought they would. If the only way he could spend time with Will anymore was to visit Dot's, he could do that.

So Mike sat in the booth, kicking his foot against the leg of the table and waited. Dot's had a few cute waitresses that went to school with him, and it was a shame to have to tell the host that no, he actually wanted to be sat in Will's section instead of the lanky blond with the pretty smile. Mike sighed and leaned back against the squeaky plastic, waiting and lamenting the wasted opportunity to pass his number off to one of the servers. Maybe Will would do it for him.

"Hi, welcome to Dot's. I'm Will, I'm going to be taking care of you tonight. Can I get you started with a coke or chocolate shake?"

Mike looked up, confused. Will standing in front of him, staring down at his notepad, pen hovering over the paper. Mike blinked, waiting for Will to look up and see who it was he was talking to, but his friend kept his red rimmed eyes locked on the paper while he waited for whatever faceless, nameless customer that had been sat in his section to speak. Mike felt a smile tug on the edge of his mouth and crossed his arms over his chest. He could play along, just to see how long it took Will to realize who was sitting at the table. If nothing else, it would be good for a laugh and would be enough fuel to tease Will with for weeks at the least. Mike cleared his throat and tried to force his voice to deepen.

"Yeah, I'll take a coke and some cheesy tots to start."

"Sounds good," Will replied with the weakest fake enthusiasm Mike had ever heard. "I'll get it right in for you. Do you need a menu or are you familiar with what we have?" Will asked as he extracted a straw from his apron and set it on the table before shoving the pen into one of the bright red pockets.

"You know, it's been a while since I've been in here, why don't you tell me about your specials?"

For a second it seemed like Will might actually look up at that, just to see what kind of an idiot would think *Dot's* of all places would have specials, but he just rolled his head on his neck and started talking again.

"Well, we make all our shakes fresh to order and we're known for our chili and hamburgers. Do you want some time to think about it or can I go ahead and put an order in for you while I grab that Coke?"

"I think I'll go ahead and get a shake too, now that you mention it. What's your favorite kind?"

Will swayed where he stood, as if he'd locked his knees and was getting light headed and tired from standing so long at the table. He shifted, rolled an ankle to crack it, and shrugged.

"Chocolate isn't bad, but the strawberry has actual fruit in it, so I guess it's my favorite."

Mike smiled and unfolded his arms.

"Strawberry then," he agreed.

"Good choice," Will chirped, a little more energetic than he'd been before, even if it was just from excitement to finally be able to retreat from the table. "I'll be right back with the coke and tots."

Mike watched him go, his ridiculous red apron tied so tight around him that Mike was sure that paired with the high waisted, white shorts, Will had to have been losing circulation. Well, at least he looked cute in his getup, like a kid playing pretend. Only it wasn't pretend for Will. He worked here almost every day and sometimes double shifts on the weekend. Ever since Jonanthan moved out, Will had been picking up the slack.

Mike had heard his parents talking about how Joyce should really downsize and what a shame it was that her kids had to work themselves to the bone to help the parent pay for a mortgage. Still, the Wheelers had never downsized when Nancy moved out and even if Joyce wanted to, what exactly would the Byers' downsize *to*? It wasn't like they could get much smaller than the little ranch they

already had unless they moved into an apartment, but if they did that, as infrequent as it was these days, there would be almost no chance of Mike sneaking in and out of Will's window when Karen and Ted were pissing him off.

He sighed and tapped his fingers mindlessly against the back of the plastic booth and looked across the diner, making up stories about the people he saw. The older man and woman had probably been married so long they hated each other and that's why he read the newspaper while she ate in silence. The young woman with the baby on her lap had been mixed up with the wrong guy and gotten knocked up. He probably tried to force her to abort, but her parents wouldn't let her, so now she was stuck with a kid who looked nothing like her and the guy had probably already moved on. And there, behind the counter where Will was ringing in the order, the girl with the bubblegum pink lipstick who twirled her hair was daydreaming about what college she'd apply to. The brunette with the curls standing next to Will and casting him glances was trying to work up the nerve to ask him to the coming fair.

Will wouldn't say 'yes' though; he never said 'yes' to hanging out anymore. Although, to be fair, Mike didn't have a nice perky set of tits, so maybe Will would make an exception for *her*.

Mike frowned, not sure why a sudden wave of anger tried to bubble up. He wasn't usually jealous of Will, at least not in the romance department. Mike was pretty sure he'd gotten more attention than his shy friend, even if Will did seem to have a certain, awkward charm that drew a fair amount of giggles and whispers. Will never seemed to take advantage of it though, and Mike was pretty sure he'd only gone on a handful of dates. Because Will never wanted to talk about them, Mike got the impression that none of them had ended with anything more than an uncomfortable couple of hours at school dances or the movies.

He rolled his eyes, annoyed at himself for how touchy and saturnine he'd been lately, and went back to tapping his foot against the leg of the table. To his credit, most of his ill temper was directed inward rather than out. Sometimes he'd stare at himself endlessly, picking out every flaw and fault until he was so angry he thought about getting in his car and just driving away. No one would miss him

anyway.

His parents had only grown more distant from each other the longer Nancy was gone, and to an extent, their kids. Holly was old enough that she was spending all her time with her own friends and Mike didn't even have anyone to talk to at home anymore. He didn't think he'd care as much as he did, but it still bothered him that the silence of the walkies was only made louder by the silence at home.

He glanced up from where he'd been staring at the booth across from him, at a little tear along the seam that a kid probably caused from sheer boredom, when Will stopped by to drop off the drinks. The coke glass was already sweating and Mike watched quietly while Will set down a cheap, brightly colored coaster underneath it before placing the shake on another. He still didn't seem to realize who he was presenting the drinks to and despite knowing it wasn't personal, Mike's feelings were a little hurt. Will, for his part, kept his eyes low, as if playing a game with himself and he'd win if he made it through the entire exchange without looking up once. Well, he was about to lose.

Mike pushed the shake away, closer to the edge of the table and closer to his friend. Will blinked at it before dipping his hand into the pocket of his apron and pulling out his notepad.

"Is something wrong? You said strawberry, right?" he asked, flipping through the frayed pages to check his untidy handwriting.

"Yeah, but it's not for me. It's for you. You said it was your favorite."

Will, with the most bewildered expression possible, finally looked away from his notepad to Mike. Even when he did finally manage to drag his eyes up to the face of the person offering him the drink, it seemed to take him a good fifteen seconds to actually process who was sitting in the booth. Maybe it was because Mike had a shit eating grin and Will wasn't used to seeing him smile anymore. When he finally did process that this was not a random stranger but someone he'd been friends with for more than a third of his entire life, Will broke into a grin.

"You asshole, why didn't you say anything?"

“Why didn’t *you* notice? It’s not my fault you can’t make eye contact for shit and that you didn’t recognize my voice.”

“Is that a joke?” Will asked, shifting his weight and shoving the notebook into his apron pocket. “I was supposed to recognize you when the voice you were using sounded like a James Earl Jones just swallowed a frog impression?”

“Hey, come on,” Mike whined in his own defense. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, it really was.”

Mike huffed and reached to drag the shake closer to himself and keep Will from picking it up as he reached for it.

“Hey, I thought that was for me.”

“I don’t share with people who insult me,” Mike countered, smiling to let Will know he was kidding.

Mike wasn’t the only one of the group who’d gotten moodier as they’d gotten older. Will was, while not prone to fits of anger on wall punching, a bit of a ticking time bomb when it came to shutting down and refusing to talk at all. Sometimes he’d take a joke or jab in stride, laugh along and smile, while other times he’d just set his jaw and scowl, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes if he stayed put at all after the bomb went off. Most of the time he just left, walked away without a word, not to be seen again until a few days later. Mike kept his eyes trained on Will who leaned back a step, like he was about to turn and go.

“Hey, I was just kidding. I’m not trying to be a jerk or anything,” he said, nudging the shake back towards his friend.

“It’s fine, Mike. I just don’t have time to stand around sharing milkshakes with you. I have other customers, *real* customers who tip and everything.”

“I’m gonna tip you,” Mike protested. “Not just in milkshakes.”

He fished around in his pocket, searching for his wallet. He pulled it

free, flipped it open, and shoved two tens at Will, frowning.

“That good enough?” he asked, a little offended that he had to *bribe* the person that was supposed to be his best friend into spending time with him. Will hesitated and shifted back again before he grabbed the money and shoved it into his apron with a scowl that put Mike’s to shame.

“And the shake.”

“It’s yours,” Mike grumbled, shoving it forward again.

He watched Will grab one of the straws from his apron and tear it open before popping it into the melting whipped cream, right next to the cherry, and drew it to his lips. He drained the glass down nearly a quarter of the way, as if it was the first thing he’d had to drink all day, before setting it down again roughly. Maybe it wasn’t the first thing he’d had to drink in the day, but it might have been the first thing that was even remotely solid. Will pinched his pennies so tight these days that he tended to skip out on lunch entirely and just sequester himself to the library instead. Maybe the scowl he gave Mike was because of how easily the taller teen had parted with the money when all Will seemed to do was save his.

“There, happy?”

“No. Jesus Christ, Will, you act like I’m such an asshole for wanting to spend time with you.”

Will frowned harder and pursed his lips into a thin line.

“Sorry I don’t have time to screw around and play video games all day, Mike. I have to work.”

“Well, what time do you get off?” Mike demanded. “Let’s hang after.”

“I don’t know. Whenever they cut me.”

Mike wanted to know what that meant, how someone could not know what time they got off of work, but he didn’t. Will was defensive and choleric enough as it was, so Mike just shrugged and nodded to show his acceptance.

"You getting a break at least?" he asked, still trying to figure out a way to spend time, even a few minutes, with Will.

The shorter teen glanced around the diner, taking stock of it.

"Let me talk to Beth. I'll tell her not to sit me for a few minutes and I can probably grab a smoke out back before your food comes up."

"You smoke?" Mike asked, genuinely surprised. "Since when?"

"Just when I'm at work," Will clarified, eyes shifting away to look at something near Mike's face. "I get the line cooks something to drink and they bum me cigarettes. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, it's fine," he agreed, though a little confused. Since when did Will smoke? It wasn't a big deal or anything, it was just weird that Mike had never noticed it before. "When?"

"Give me five minutes to check on my tables and I'll meet you in the alley out back, okay?"

"Sure."

Mike watched him go, watched Will say something to the hostess who gave him a thumbs up before he moved away to talk to his other customers. From where he sat, Mike saw the strained, forced smile and awkward way Will held himself, hands tucked around his elbows as he forced himself to laugh at whatever his customers were saying. When he bent to scoop up their dishes, the back of his shirt came untucked and rode up a little, exposing the dimples on his hips. Mike looked away, uncomfortable with the sudden, unwanted thought that the dimples were *cute*.

He grabbed the shake and sipped it, still watching Will make his way between the tables. When he finally disappeared back into the kitchen with an armful of used dishes, Mike grabbed the cherry and popped it in his mouth. He chewed it as he stood, the overly sweet, artificial flavor coating his tongue in a layer of runny syrup. The stem was bitter but he chewed it anyway as he paced around the alley, near the 'employees only' door people used to take out trash and sneak cigarettes.

Dot's shared the alley with a corner store, a video rental place, and the only decent frozen yogurt shop in the entire town. Mike leaned against the wall, shoved his hands into his pockets, and chewed the cherry stem. He glanced over when the door cracked open, letting out a sliver of light. From the crack in the door, someone slipped out. For a moment, Mike considered just staying there, pressed against the wall and hidden. He wasn't sure what he'd do, maybe jump out and surprise Will or just observe what his friend would do from his hiding spot. It didn't matter, because Mike didn't actually do any of the things that danced through his mind.

Will was glancing around, cigarette between his teeth, hands fumbling inside his cherry red apron as he searched for something. He managed to pull a lighter free and in the moment of illumination from the flame as the door behind him swung shut, Mike didn't recognize Will. He looked older, more drawn than he used to, and tired. The dark circles around his eyes looked like bruises, like the ones he used to have when he'd try to cut through the football field to get home faster and end up in a fight, or like the ones he'd return with after a visit with Lonnie.

"Fucking asshole," Will mumbled, taking a drag.

"Who's the asshole?" Mike asked, smiling wide as he stepped into view. "You better not be talking about me."

"Actually, I was," Will quipped, shooting him a look. "I thought you ditched me after dragging me off the floor."

"Come on, when have I ever ditched you?" he shot back. "Let me have a hit of that."

Will handed the cigarette over, rolling his eyes as he did.

"Are you being serious right now?"

"Yeah actually, I am."

Will huffed and started to lean against the building before stopping himself, as if he was worried about staining his uniform.

"How about every day for almost a year?"

“What? C’mon, that’s not true.”

“It kind of is,” Will said, reaching out to take back his cigarette.

Mike couldn’t say he minded. It didn’t have a filter and whoever had rolled it had done a pretty shitty job. He ran his tongue across the roof of his mouth, little pieces of tobacco sticking to it. He swallowed them, not wanting to spit and embarrass himself as Will looked at him in the dark.

“That’s not fair. You’ve been avoiding me for months,” he countered, annoyed as he felt a piece of the dried leaf wedge its way between his teeth.

Will took another hit and Mike watched, waiting for an explanation as the smoke curled around Will’s face.

“You never picked up the phone.”

“What?”

“After that summer, Sophomore year. You told me I could call you, but you were never home.”

Mike hesitated. That wasn’t true, was it? He’d been home and gone to pick Will up at the bus station hadn’t he? He wanted to bring that up in defense, but in all honesty, he wasn’t sure it was solid enough to stand on. He’d been home because he had to be, because it was what was expected of him by his parents. What if he hadn’t been? What if Will hadn’t been able to reach him and ended up having to wait for his mom or brother to get off work and pick him up? Would he have tried to walk, or maybe even accepted a ride from a stranger if he was desperate enough?

Mike chewed his lip.

“Come on, don’t hog that,” he mumbled, looking away.

Will handed the cigarette back without a word.

For a while, neither spoke. It was too uncomfortable, too difficult to admit that what Will said might have been true. Mike held the

cigarette without taking a hit before Will reached and took it back.

“So what, you wanna go swimming or something?” he finally asked, glancing up.

Will looked surprised and he raised his eyebrows.

“What, now?”

Mike shrugged.

“I dunno. It’s almost June. Should be warm enough, right?”

Will laughed and stomped out the cherry of his cigarette beneath his heel before tossing the butt in the dumpster.

“You’re funny. I already told you I don’t know what time I get off.”

“So what? What time do you guys close?”

Will looked away, to the place where he’d stomped out the cigarette. Mike waited, hands shoved back into his pockets for Will to find an excuse to say ‘no’ again, like he always did. As if on cue, the sorter teen looked up, mouth parted as he took a step back.

“I don’t know. We close at ten, do you really want to hang around that long and wait? We have school tomorrow. It’s gonna be cold as shit.”

“C’mon Will, I gave you twenty bucks, doesn’t that buy me any of your time? You’re like an expensive date that won’t even let me kiss you at the door when I take you home.”

As soon as he said it, he felt himself burn red. He had no idea why *that* was the comparison he’d come up with, and he felt himself cringe as Will blinked at him in the dark. Jesus, he was such a dumbass. He felt himself stand there, frozen in place with his smile stuck on like someone had super glued it there, just waiting for Will to tell him as much. For a second, his eyes darted down to Will’s mouth, where the cigarette had been minutes before and wondered if

Will would taste like smoke.

Great, now he wasn't just making inappropriate comments, he was having the thoughts again. They were the same ones his father had made him go to the counselor about, the ones that had cropped up on a pretty regular basis until the therapy (and even after, but as long as he never admitted it, the counselor seemed to stay off his case). He'd spent enough time training himself to focus on Carrie Fisher instead of Harrison Ford or Mark Hamill when he watched Star Wars that he'd even tricked himself into thinking he'd gotten over the impulses to look too long or too hard at men. Apparently he hadn't done as good of a job as he'd thought.

Because Will wasn't wrong about Mike avoiding him after that summer, even if Mike didn't want to admit to it. Will had done too much growing up, too much filling out and he was too tempting to look at. Mike didn't do it on purpose, but he had to stop his wandering mind somehow and 'out of sight, out of mind', right? Besides, Will thinking Mike was just being a bad friend was better than him knowing Mike thought about *kissing* him and... other things. If Will knew that Mike thought about putting his hands on Will's ever broadening shoulders or on his ridiculously narrow waist, only accentuated by that ridiculously tight apron, he'd hate Mike. Well, hate him even more than he already did because of how lousey of a friend he'd been lately.

"Fine. I probably won't be here to close anyway. But you're driving."

Mike brightened, smile returning to a more relaxed natural one than what he'd just worn.

"Well duh, it's not like we can both fit on your bike anymore."

Will rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

"Whatever, asshole. I gotta get back in. I'm sure your tots have been dead in the window for ages by now."

The tots were in fact as dead as a doornail by the time he got in to eat them, but Mike didn't really care. He hadn't been that hungry to begin with and the food was just an excuse to hang out with Will. He

picked at it, eating the burnt jalapenos and watched Will float from table to table, taking orders and delivering food. When he was finally 'cut', it was nearing eight thirty. He'd sort of thought that would mean Will was able to leave, but to Mike's displeasure, all it meant was that his friend was done taking tables, not that his work was done.

Mike sat at the booth, sipping his soda while Will swept, wiped down tables, and refilled the pop machine with heavy boxes of flavored syrup. It seemed like he was one of the only men working in the front instead of the kitchen, so anything heavy was his responsibility. Filling the ice, taking out the trash, moving the tables and booths around so all the other servers could clean, it all seemed to fall on his shoulders. Mike didn't know if Will minded though, because all the girls he worked with seemed to fawn over him, offering him thanks and praise for the help and telling him he was such a gentleman to do it. Will just shrugged and said it wasn't a problem, but Mike knew if it had been him, he would have basked in the attention.

Will really was going to end up with more dates than he was before the year was out.

When Will was finally done, it was after nine.

"You still wanna go?" he asked, backpack slung over his shoulder, bike balanced near his hip.

"Yeah man, of course. Throw the bike in the trunk and I'll drive."

The quarry wasn't far, at least not by car it wasn't. In the passenger seat next to him, Will was untying his apron and folding it. He'd already taken the money he'd earned and was shoving it in his wallet.

"What'd you end up making?"

"Thirty nine something."

Mike grinned, pleased with himself for having provided more than half of Will's tips for the night. He opened his mouth to say something about it and about how Will should act more happy to see

him the next time he wandered into Dot's, but thankfully stopped himself before he could. Will had been touchy enough lately without Mike adding to it by teasing, no matter how gentle the ribbing might be. Instead of making fun and laughing about it, he decided on just concentrating on the road, on not missing the unmarked path with no shoulder so he didn't end up running the car off entirely and trashing it. It wasn't difficult to find a spot to park, but it was a little harder to make the way to the dock in the dark. Mike tripped over everything, nearly tore the skin clean off his shin when he caught his ankle on a branch. Will didn't extend the 'no teasing' rule to him the way Mike had done for him, and he heard his friend chuckle somewhere near him.

"You need glasses or something? Still haven't grown into those gangly spider legs?"

"Oh, screw you," he huffed as he found his footing. "I'm as graceful as a gazelle."

"Yeah, one with a broken leg," Will countered, easily passing him. "Swear to god, you'd think someone built like a dancer would have a little more grace."

Mike tripped again, this time thrown off by Will's comment instead of his own ineptitude. Ahead of him, he heard Will laugh to himself. Was the dancer comment supposed to be a good thing, or was Will making fun of him again? Either way, Mike felt himself flush red and, despite how inelegantly he moved in it, was grateful for the dark. At least Will wouldn't see him blushing like an idiot while he tried to tell his stomach to calm down and stop doing flips. By the time he managed to stumble to the steps of the dock, Will was already stripping his clothes off. Mike said another prayer of thanks that it was well after sundown, because if Will could see his expression or see how long he spent looking at him while he wriggled out of his shorts, he would have thought Mike was a freak for sure.

Because there was just *no way* his therapist or father would approve of the way Mike kept glancing at Will's back or the swell of his newly exposed thighs. If they knew, he'd be dragged to the rabbi and made to listen to whatever lesson he was supposed to learn about faith and devotion before being shipped off to one of those camps for 'troubled

and confused youth' for a month or two over the summer. Ted had already threatened him with it once; if he knew Mike was still having those thoughts he might actually follow through this time. Mike ducked his head and began tugging his own shirt off.

He'd half expected to hear a splash, some indication Will wasn't waiting for him before jumping in, but when he looked up, the shorter teen wasn't doing anything other than dangling his feet in the water. Mike walked over, shirt clutched to his chest in an almost defensive pose, his own pants still firmly in place, and crouched next to his friend. Will looked over, eyebrow quirked.

"Not swimming? Wasn't this your idea?"

"Yeah, I mean... I dunno."

"Seriously? You waited all that time, drove all the way out here, and now you don't know? You're such a tease. I was ready to go."

Mike felt that blush that had been rising spread up to his ears and down his chest. He squirmed, flopped onto his ass and started pulling at his shoes to at least put on a good show of following through on his request to swim, even if he wasn't so sure about it now. He didn't want to have to pull his shorts down and possibly expose his shame. Of course for him to do that, it would require Will to be looking for it and the chances of that were pretty slim. Maybe the cold water would do him some good, at least get him under control a little. Mike shuffled out of his clothes and hurriedly pulled them to his lap as he sat. Will rolled his eyes.

"You're stalling."

"What?"

"Your clothes? I know you're not getting in when you're just holding them like that. You're gonna wait for me to jump in, tell you how cold it is, and then you're going to say you changed your mind."

"No I'm not," Mike protested, knuckles turning white the harder he clutched at the mass of cloth. "I'm getting ready," he finished, pushing them aside and onto the dock. "See? I'm not trying to trick

you-”

He gasped, taken totally off guard as Will’s palm pressed against his back and shoved, knocking him from the dock into the water. He sputtered, bubbles escaping his nose and floating away as he kicked and propelled himself back up to the surface.

“You asshole!”

“What, is it cold?” Will asked, a wide, crooked grin on his face.

“Wanna find out?” Mike snarled, shooting his hand out to grab Will and drag him in as well.

Will laughed and kicked at him while Mike’s wet hands slipped against his skin. Mike smiled, satisfied when he managed to get a good grip around Will’s boney ankles and pulled. It might not have been the most well thought out plan, but it wasn’t a thought he’d considered until after he’d done it. Will fell on him, forcing him under again. Mike struggled to right himself. He used whatever parts of Will he could grab to pull himself up, not sure what he was touching. When Will reached down, gripped him around the shoulder, and pulled him up. Mike ran a hand across his face, pushing his hair away from his face while Will let him go and balanced himself with one arm on the dock for support.

“Well?” Mike asked. “Cold, huh?”

“It’s not that bad.”

Mike laughed because even though he claimed immunity, Will’s chattering teeth told another story.

“Yeah, sure. You know, I think you might have been right. It’s a little cold for this,” Mike whispered, pushing himself to the dock as well.

“You think?” Will shot back, giving him an ‘I fucking told you so’ look.

“Yeah. I mean, a little.”

“Wanna get out?”

“No, just keep kicking and you’ll warm up,” Mike insisted.

He reached out without meaning to and pressed a palm to Will’s shaking back, rubbing circles into it vigorously. He would have pulled away if Will had shown any signs of discomfort or unease, but his friend simply lay his head against the arm he’d been using for balance, cheek pressed to his bicep, and sighed.

“Fine, but you owe me more than twenty if I get sick and have to miss work.”

“Deal.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Well I know I haven't updated this one in a while, but I really needed a break from some of the heavier content work and since I finished the fantasy AUs, this is what I went with.

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated. Be well and take care of yourselves.